

## **The Feast of Jonathan Daniels – August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2011 – The Rev. Gary Mitchener**

I remember the night we baptized Larry Hui. At the midnight Easter Vigil (back in “those” days) we always let the baptismal candidates decide whether they wanted to be “sprinkled” or “dunked.” Being Dartmouth students, you know which they chose! So we borrowed a galvanized metal tank (used for watering cattle) from the West Lebanon Feed Supply and put it up in the chancel of St. Thomas Church and filled it using Mr. Hodge’s garden hose, so the water was not exactly tepid. The candidates, usually attired in cut-offs and tee shirts, would each give their testimony of what had brought them to this point of deciding to be baptized. Then I’d dunk each one, all the way under, and when they came up again, there were towels and a white robe, just like the early Church. Then the challenge was how to empty the tank before the altar guild ladies showed up the next morning to set up for the early Communion service. Those are great memories.

Anne Lamott, in one of her books, writes about the time her close friend Pammy was dying of cancer at the age of 37 and the two of them went shopping at Macy’s. Pammy was in a wheelchair, with a wig and three weeks to live. Anne had tried on a skimpy little dress and had come out to model it for Pammy. Anne wanted to know if she thought it made her look big in the hips. Pam said so kindly, “Annie? You just don’t have that kind of time.” I have those words taped to my bathroom mirror: “Gary, you just don’t have that kind of time.” I tell this story because I think it has something to do with baptism.

I sometimes wonder how those eight years I lived here at the Edge might have been different, had I had those words taped to the mirror in my bathroom upstairs in the apartment. As a closeted gay man, having been brought up in a fundamentalist church, who couldn’t have made it into Dartmouth if my life depended on it, constantly asking myself “what the hell am I doing here pretending to be a pastor to all these bright, gifted, attractive Dartmouth students?”

There were also many times when Jonathan Daniels—for totally different reasons—asked himself what the hell am I doing here?

(One of the neat things about having known a real “martyr”—as opposed to someone with a martyr complex—is, whenever folks try putting a halo around Jonathan Daniels--we who knew him can come up with real-life memories which paint-- shall we say, a fuller picture.)

One of those who knew him best was Judith Upham, a fellow seminarian who worked with Jon in Selma, and knew how often he’d change his mind. Once, just a month before he was killed, Jon confided to Judith that he was so close to despair over the state of the Movement in Selma that he didn’t intend to

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even MENTION civil rights for at least a year after he got back to school. But then later he was making plans to spend all the next summer working with the Movement.

St. Paul says “we have this treasure in earthen vessels” (broken clay pots) so there’s no danger of anyone confusing the incomparable power of God with the likes of us, who are merely channels of that power.

But the thing that any of Jon’s friends had to say about him--with all his very human quirks--was that Jonathan had a PASSION for wanting to know God’s will for his life.

Let me back up to give you the chronological sequence of that Spring back in 1965: it all began March 7--“Bloody Sunday” as it came to be called. After the State Patrol and local police used billy clubs and teargas to brutally keep the marchers from crossing the bridge on their way to Montgomery in their struggle to be able to vote, the whole WORLD saw it that night on the Evening News. Martin Luther King came on television inviting folks from all across America, folks who cared about justice, to come and join the folks of Selma by marching in solidarity with them in their struggle.

Now, in those days our daily routine in seminary typically was to do Evensong in the chapel at 5 o’clock (always chanting the Magnificat—the song Mary sang when she discovered she was pregnant, the song about God putting down the mighty from their seat and exalting the humble, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty) and then we’d go to supper. After supper we’d crowd into the TV room for the Evening News.

That night it was during the singing of the Magnificat followed by watching the Evening News (something about the juxtaposition of those two events)--that Jonathan KNEW he had to go to Selma, along with other students and some of our professors as well.

But unlike the rest of us who marched and then came back to Cambridge, Jon and Judith had requested permission from the faculty to return to Alabama for the remainder of that semester to help with voter registration, and then drove back to Massachusetts in June to take their exams. Jon then returned to Alabama to continue the work that summer.

I remember some of the letters he wrote from Selma to us back at school. Here is one excerpt: “I lost all fear...when I knew in my bones and sinews, that—in the only sense that really matters—I have already died and my life is hid with Christ in God.”

On August 20<sup>th</sup>, after being released from jail with others for demonstrating, Jonathan was killed with a shotgun blast by Tom Coleman, a 52-year old unemployed state highway worker, who six weeks later was acquitted by an all-white jury after less than 2 hours of deliberation.

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“In the only sense that really matters, I have ALREADY died, and my life is HID with Christ in God.” Jonathan here is echoing the words of St. Paul in one of the epistles, words essentially about BAPTISM. That in our baptism—whether it’s in a cattle watering tank in Hanover New Hampshire or a fancy cathedral somewhere—we ALL have died, we ALL have been lowered into that watery tomb, drowned, put to death, dying to the tyranny of our own ego, to then be raised up with Christ.

My friends, what I want to leave you with this afternoon in all my meandering, is that this is not something we only ASPIRE to, as though in some far-off distant spiritual future; but this has already HAPPENED to us. WE too have ALREADY died, and we too are HIDDEN with Christ in God, hidden even from OURSELVES!

Jonathan often commented about how our motives are always mixed, that there’s no such thing as a PURE motive, whether it’s in going to Selma or anything else. But in spite of our mixed motives, it’s that rock-bottom awareness that “in the only sense that really matters we have ALREADY died and our lives are hid with Christ in God” that allows us to let go of FEAR, that—just like Anne Lamott’s friend Pammy—we can sort OUT what we just “don’t have that kind of time” for, over against the few things that ultimately really DO matter.

So, what Anne’s friend Pammy’s words point to, and what Jonathan’s words point to, is not some heavy pious OBLIGATION, but rather an INVITATION to BE who we already ARE in Christ, that we have ALREADY DIED, and that DEATH is really our FREEDOM, the freedom that underlies everything else, freedom that is grounded in the universe itself, grounded in the very “ground of our being,” grounded in the Risen Life of the One “in whose service IS PERFECT freedom.”

Back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Martin Luther, toward the end of his life, suffered from depression, questioning everything he’d based the Reformation on. It’s said that the one thing that kept him going was to keep reminding himself, almost like a mantra: “I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized.” In other words, “I have already died, and my life is hid with Christ in God.”

Let’s stand and sing together “We shall overcome”

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One last thing: I invite you to sing it again, but this time to alter two of the words in light of Jonathan’s having said he ALREADY had died: let’s change it to “We HAVE overcome TODAY.”